

When Technology Fails

The key to dealing with technology failure is to prepare for it

Photocopier rage. That's right – that's the newest workplace trend. A recent national poll by Ipsos-Reid for Hewlett Packard indicated that more than one out of 10 Canadians have, in a moment of frustration, taken to physical abuse and have actually hit or kicked a defenseless machine. Another three in 10 admitted a strong desire to lash out on occasion, but managed to hold themselves back.

Is this what we've come to? We are so enraged by the challenge of technology that we're ready to beat up poor, helpless devices? Well, maybe so.

Despite the advances of technology into the workplace during the last decade, there still remain many people who haven't quite established a great relationship with technology. Byte Black/Human-Ware studied the attitudes of 3,129 employees in California over a four year period, and came up with some fascinating insights. While 12% of executives could be considered "eager adopters" of new technologies, the vast majority of people aren't racing to try out new technologies.

Indeed, some 59% were categorized as "hesitant prove-its" who wait for someone to show them how technology can help them, and another 29% were classified as "resisters," people who try and avoid technology altogether, or as much as possible. (These are the folks likely to be beating up on the photocopier!).

Perhaps our collective rage is well founded – after all, we know that technology sometimes fails us when we need it the most. I don't know how many times I have been working on an important article or report, only to have my computer crash at the worst possible moment.

As we make our way, however hesitantly, into the digital age, our growing reliance on technology is becoming our Achilles heel. We're implementing customer databases that tell us everything about our sales prospects and customers – yet we might be subjecting ourselves to unwarranted risk if we lose this important crown jewel. We're learning how to make technology a key part of our sales presentation – and yet, we might see our computer freeze just as we begin. We're learning that while technology can be our

friend, it can also be our own worst enemy.

Certainly I subscribe to that belief, and do everything I can to prepare for the eventuality of a problem. As a frequent speaker at conferences and someone who runs presentations from my laptop, there are several things I do before I dare head out the door. First, I make sure that I have a few copies of my presentation stored in different locations on my laptop. Not only that, but I also store a copy on a floppy disk inside my jacket pocket. And I load a copy onto a few of my various websites. Oh, and just to be on the safe side, I print a copy to take with me in case all else fails!

Paranoia? Not really. I have come to realize that there is a special variation of Murphy's Law that applies to technology and computers: Anything that can go wrong will, in absolutely spectacular fashion at the worst possible moment, in a manner so as to cause maximum inconvenience, grief and embarrassment.

So what are the must-have safeguards and attitudes that companies and employees must have in place in case of a technology failure? Several things:

1. Be prepared for surprises and unexpected developments. Surely, you have been in a situation where you were faced with an unplanned challenge – there is not much explanation needed here.

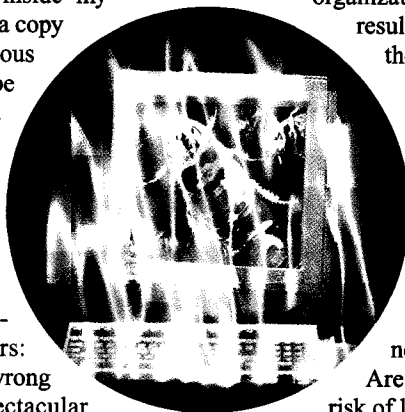
2. Have a plan. Corporate contingency planning has gained a new degree of respect since the events of September 11, with the realization that proper planning isn't a frill – it's a must. Those organizations who had a truly effective technology recovery plan were able to bring their operations back to a semblance of order within a matter of days, despite the complete destruction of their original office. That's the real benefit of a comprehensive contingency plan. From a personal perspective, you can also plan for things to go wrong, simply by identifying the technologies that are most important

to you, and then planning what you can do to quickly replace them (and any data) if necessary.

3. Always backup, and then some. A key reason why many companies based at Ground Zero were able to recover so quickly was that they had a lot of off-site backup. In the world of Wall Street, there are companies who obtain backup data from financial organizations every few hours. The result was that, for some firms, there was actually very little data loss. Good backup policies aren't just a corporate necessity – they are personally important as well. When was the last time you personally backed up the data on your laptop or home computer? If the answer is never, then ask yourself this: Are you willing to accept the risk of losing all that information?

4. Redundancy counts. On a corporate level, make sure that your plan includes a lot of options. Organizations are busy setting up parallel data centres, and corporate databases that could be accessed remotely by staff, should problems develop. You can also plan for redundancy on a personal level. Consider my own situation – when I'm on the road, I make sure that I have dial-in Internet phone numbers so that I can get online via Sympatico, Compuserve and AT&T Canada. Why? For the simple reason that you can't always trust that any particular service is going to work for you in the city you may be visiting. Connectivity is important, and so I go with several different ways of achieving it: At home, I have both a cable modem and high-speed DSL Internet connections to ensure that I'm always online.

5. Plan ahead and understand alternatives. If you are travelling to make a key client presentation, then you most definitely will want to prepare for something to go wrong. That's why you might want to talk to your customer in advance, to find out if they have some equipment ready in case you



experience a problem with yours. Or check out local companies in advance that would be able to rent you a laptop, LCD projector or other necessary equipment in a hurry, if necessary. In addition, familiarize yourself with any instant-replacement or repair programs that might be available under your laptop warranty.

6. Test your plans. Any type of contingency plan is useless if it is not tested. That's why organizations need to regularly check how well their plan might work, through a disaster simulation. And from a personal level, if you are backing up important files, test them to make sure you can actually read the backup! Plenty of people have been horribly shocked to find out that due to a variety of reasons (older software or false assumptions), their actual backup (which they had thought made them safe), actually didn't work at all!

7. Educate. Any type of corporate plan for dealing with the challenges of technology is quite useless if people don't understand the plan, and their role in making any contingency plan active. That's why drills are critical – they help people to understand their various roles and responsibilities during challenging times.

8. Explore new technologies. At a corpo-

rate level, disaster and contingency planning has become big business, and there are plenty of experts who can help you out. From a smaller perspective, you need to appreciate that sophisticated backup systems don't need to be expensive in the small office or home office environment. I make use of an OnStream tape backup system, available for less than \$500, which can save copies of all my important data on to 30 gigabyte cartridges.

I also have tapes stored in my bank vault, and when I travel, I leave another copy with my neighbours. But I haven't restricted myself to that – I regularly "burn" really important data on to a CDRom, and store this in various places as well. There are plenty of innovative methods of backing up your data beyond traditional means. Check out @Backup (www.backup.com), which allows you to set up your system so that all of your important data is sent to this company automatically overnight (encrypted, of course, so it can't be accessed). It's a worthwhile service and is available for as little as \$50 a year.

9. Never assume that what you do is enough – or that you are ever fully prepared. Good contingency planning always assumes the worst, and then some. You have to constantly revise and revisit your corporate contingency plan.

10. Don't Panic. If you have lost some data or something goes wrong, don't panic. That's the worst possible response because you'll simply cloud your judgment. I was once on stage in front of about 1,200 people, ready to do a presentation. With less than five minutes remaining before I began, I managed to corrupt my presentation file. (This was the situation that taught me my lesson and led to my having multiple copies of my presentation on hand). I paused for a moment and realized I had an original copy on my home office desktop. I whipped out my cell phone, called my wife (who works with me at home) and managed to get a copy sent to me by email, but with seconds to spare. ☐

Jim Carroll is a columnist, media commentator and author. He has been a speaker at over 500 conferences and meetings, with audiences ranging from 10 to 2,000 people. He has examined the topics of coping with digital change, leadership in the digital age, and motivating people to embrace the technological world. You can visit his website at www.jimcarroll.com, and he welcomes your comments at jcarroll@jimcarroll.com.

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